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NO. I.

BALAAAM'S PROPHECY (NUMBERS XXIV. 17-24) AND THE GOD SHETH.

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I must begin by apologizing for adding another commentary to the many which have already appeared on the Prophecy of Balaam in Num. xxiv. 17-24; but I believe I have some new conjectures and facts to bring forward which may possibly prove of interest. That the prophecy is a cento has long since been recognized. It does not present an unbroken thread of connection, and the interruptions in verses 20, 21 and 23 suggest either that successive prophecies have been attached one by one to the original prophecy in verses 17-19, or else that the passages they introduce have been taken from other documents of various age and ancestry. An examination of the original prophecy makes the latter view the more probable.

In the first place the prophecy begins with a pronoun which has no antecedent, "I shall see *him*," "I shall behold *him*," says Balaam (verse 16), but we have no indication as to who it is that is meant by the *him*. It cannot be Israel, since Balaam was seeing Israel ranged close below him at the time; it cannot refer to "the *star*," since the latter is mentioned subsequently. The passage has obviously been taken from elsewhere, with the omission of its commencement (like Isa. ii. 2). That the latter part of the verse also has been borrowed from another source is clear from a comparison with Num. xxi. 28; Jer. xlviii. 45, and Amos ii. 2, on which I shall have more to say presently. Verse 19 must also be derived from some other context. Though united by the conjunction with the preceding verse, the nominative cannot be "Israel," as this would make no sense, and we must therefore construe the verb with the impersonal "one." But the expression, "And let one rule out of Jacob" has no apparent connection with the statement immediately preceding, "Israel is doing valiantly;" while the prep-

osition מן leads us to believe that the punctuation ought to be יר "one shall descend from Jacob" rather than ירד from רדה. This at all events was the reading of the Septuagint translators.¹ The עיר at the end of the verse cannot be right. No "city" has been referred to, only the land of Edom and Seir,—an additional proof that the verse did not originally belong to the place which it now occupies. A comparison with Num. xxi. 28 seems to indicate that the reading ought to be ער, and that the verse primarily followed immediately upon verse 17, verse 18 being an interpolation. Possibly the cause of the change of ער into עיר is to be found in Ps. lx. 9.

When we turn to the concluding verses of the prophecy (20–24), the first point which strikes us is that, whereas the original prophecy appears to refer to the conquest of Moab and Edom by David, the "parable" upon Amalek finds its fulfillment in the destruction of the Amalekites by Saul (cf. 1 Chron. iv. 43), while verses 22 and 24 transport us to the period of the Assyrian campaigns. The second point is the interpolation of verse 23, which not only interrupts the context, but is introduced by the imperfect formula "he took up his parable and said," instead of the complete, "he looked on Aššûr," etc. The paronomasia in verses 20, 21, will also be noted, inasmuch as no trace of it appears in the preceding verses.

Geiger has ingeniously suggested that in verse 22 we should disregard the Massoretic punctuation, and simply render "Who shall survive Samuel?" In this case, the words would be out of their true place which would be immediately after verse 20. Against this is the fact that the prophecy in verse 24 terminates with the same words as does verse 20.

The imperfect condition of the introductory formula in verse 23 is shown by the Septuagint to be due to a corruption of the text. The Septuagint has *Kai idōn τὸν Ὠγ*, a reading which naturally suggests the name of Agag. It cannot have originated in the אג below (which is translated *ō ō*), but is the best evidence yet adduced in support of Geiger's conjecture. It must be remembered that Agag is mentioned in the Massoretic text of xxiv. 7.

We should then have the following as the original text of verses 20–23 :—
 "And when he looked on Amalek, he took up his parable and said: Amalek was the first of the nations; but his latter end shall be that he perish forever. And when he looked on Agag, he took up his parable and said: Alas, who shall survive Samuel? And he looked on the Kenites, and took up his parable and said: Strong is thy dwelling-place, and thou puttest thy nest in Sela. Nevertheless the Kenite shall be wasted until Aššûr shall carry thee away captive."

There would now remain only the enigmatical verse 24. That the Massoretic text is corrupt is obvious from the impossibility of construing it, and the reading

¹ So also the Samaritan and Syriac versions and Onkelos. Gaab, Vater, Knobel, etc., endeavor to escape from the grammatical difficulty by proposing to read ירדמם יעקב or ירדמם יעקב.

of the Septuagint *καὶ ἐξελεύσεται* indicates that we should read **יִצְאָאִים** or **יִצְאָאִים** instead of **יִצְאָאִים**.¹ But what is the antecedent of those who "come forth"? If we could accept the third person singular of the Septuagint (**יִצָא**) the reference would be to "Aššûr" in verse 22; indeed the plural participle might also be understood in the same sense, **אִשׁוּר** being construed as a collective. But **יִ** cannot signify the "sea-coast;" it is used only of the "bank" of a river, not of the shore of the sea. I am, therefore, tempted to believe that the passage is corrupt, and that instead of **יִ כְּתִים** we ought, perhaps, to read **יִרוּשָלִים**. However this may be, the name of Chittim can be defended only on the supposition that the verse was interpolated into the prophecy in the Persian or Ptolemaic age, and that the name of Aššûr which occurs in it denotes Syria. But against this supposition several weighty reasons may be urged. The obvious corruption of the first words of the verse and the various readings to which they have given rise can but be explained on the hypothesis that the verse was of much greater antiquity than such a supposition would imply; moreover, it is Eber and not Aššûr which is "also to perish forever;" and lastly the words **וְעֵנּוּ אִשׁר** are manifestly an interpolation. They destroy the parallelism of the verse; they interrupt the context, which states that Eber and not Aššûr is to perish; and the repetition of the word **וְעֵנּוּ** indicates a scribe's error. Furthermore, unless Aššûr is taken to mean Syria, it could hardly be attacked, and as a matter of history, we know never was attacked, by an expedition coming from Cyprus; while it is difficult to make Aššûr synonymous with Eber, as the present reading of the verse would imply. It seems to me, therefore, that "Aššûr" must originally have been a marginal gloss upon **וְעֵנּוּ**, which subsequently made its way into the text, and once there was necessarily provided with a second **וְעֵנּוּ**. The whole verse would thus run: "And they come out of, and they (i. e., the Assyrians) afflict Eber." It must be left to future research to decide what tribe or nationality can be meant by "Eber." It may be noted, however, that Abram after coming out of Syria is called "the Hebrew" in Gen. XIV. 13, and that Damascene tradition made him a king of Damascus.

It is now time to return to the latter part of the verse 17, with which the prophecy of Balaam begins. I have already noticed that the passage is found in varying forms in other parts of the Old Testament, where it is provided with a context which is wanting here. Its oldest form seems to be preserved in Num. XXI. 28. Here a *mâšâl* or "old poem"² is quoted, like the *mâšâl* which Balaam is said to have "taken up," and which, though subsequently adapted to the conquest of Moab by the Israelites, is really an Amorite

¹ This is also the reading of the Samaritan codex and version (**יִצְאָאִים** and **יִצְאָאִים**). The Targum of Jonathan has **יִצְאָאִים** "armies," which, however, cannot be construed any more than the Massoretic **יִצָא**.

² In Assyrian *masalu* denotes "an extract" from an old book (W. A. I., IV. 15, 23).

song of triumph—the single specimen of Amorite literature that has been preserved to us. Its adaptation to the successes of Israel caused one portion of it to become popular among Hebrew writers; hence we find Jeremiah quoting it in XLVIII. 45, 46, and Amos slightly varying its words in II. 2. Balaam treats the original with the same freedom as Amos.

The original ran as follows (Num. XXI. 28): “For there is a fire gone out of Heshbon, a flame from the city of Sihon;¹ it hath consumed Ar of Moab, the lords of the high places of the Arnon.” In Balaam’s adaptation this becomes, “There has trodden a star out of Jacob and a sceptre has arisen out of Israel; and it has shattered the temples of Moab and the head of all the sons of Sheth.” Here I have corrected the Massoretic reading קרקר into the קדקר of the text of Jeremiah; קרקר, the Pilpel of קור “to dig up,” is not used of living persons, and would moreover destroy the parallelism of the verse. It is on account of the parallelism, moreover, that I have followed Ewald in rendering פאתי by “the temples” of the head, in accordance with Lev. XIX. 27, though the Septuagint, Vulgate and Syriac, like the Targums of Onkelos and Jonathan, must have read פחתי “governors”—a reading certainly more conformable with the original than פאתי.

For Heshbon and the city of Sihon Balaam substitutes Jacob and Israel; for the ideas of “fire” and “flame” he substitutes those of “star” and “sceptre.” But the two latter ideas are not in parallelism with one another, while the verb מחץ, with which they are construed, is applicable only to the “sceptre,” and not to “the star.” Moreover the verb ררך to which כוכב serves as nominative cannot be used of a star; the natural verb to employ with כוכב would be הם which is, however, appropriated to שבת. Either כוכב or שבת must be a false reading, and since the verbs apply to שבת and not to כוכב, it is clear that it must be the latter word which is in fault. I cannot, however, propose a satisfactory emendation. The analogy of Gen. XLIX. 10, would suggest a word like מחקק; but ררך is also a strange expression, and the analogy of Num. XXI. 28, and Jer. XLVIII. 45, would lead us to expect only one verb.

The change made in the second part of the passage in Balaam’s prophecy is followed by Jeremiah, except that Jeremiah necessarily retains the אכל of the original in place of Balaam’s מחץ. The only differences between Jeremiah and Balaam are that Jeremiah has the singular פאת instead of the dual פאתי and שאן instead of שת.² Amos also (II. 2), who has transformed the ער מואב of the original into the like-sounding ארמנות, evidently read שאן which he explains by תרועה and קול שופר, an addition which spoils the rhythm of

¹ For מבין סיחון, Jer. XLVIII. 5 gives us the ungrammatical מקרית סיחון, where it is obvious that we should read בית “the house of Sihon,” like the Assyrian Bit-Humri for Samaria.

² I have already discussed קרקר instead of קדקר.

his verse.¹ The reading **שאן** must therefore be early. On the other hand, while the more difficult **שת** might be explained by the more intelligible **שאן**, it is impossible to suppose that **שאן** could have been corrupted into a word which was such a puzzle to later generations as **שת**. Here as elsewhere the rule holds good that the harder reading is the best.

Regarding **שת**, then, as the word of which **שאן** was a later attempt at explanation, what meaning can we assign to it? The expression "all the sons of Sheth" replaces the words of the original, "the lords of the high place of Arnon." The latter were the Moabites, who worshiped on the high places of Arnon; the inference therefore is obvious that "the sons of Sheth" were the Moabites who worshiped in the same locality. The expression will thus be parallel to Ben-Ammi, "an Ammonite" (Gen. xix. 38); and since we now know that Ammi was the name of the god of Ammon, we may conclude that Sheth also was the name of the Moabite god who was worshiped on the very high-places from which Balaam surveyed the children of Israel.

The conclusion is verified by archæological evidence. At the foot of the south-eastern angle of the Harem at Jerusalem Sir C. Warren found among other fragments of early pottery two handles ornamented with a representation of the winged solar disk and inscriptions in Phœnician letters of the pre-exilic period. One of these reads **למלך-צף** "belonging to Melech-Tsiph," the other **למלך-שת** "belonging to Melech-Sheth." The latter name can only be explained as signifying "Moloch is Sheth," like Malchiel, Malchiyah or Melchizedek, thus bearing witness to the fact that not only was Sheth a deity, but that he was worshiped by persons who left their pottery within the precincts of Jerusalem in the valley of the sons of Hinnom. It is therefore possible that Dr. Neubauer may be right in identifying him with the antediluvian patriarch Seth, the father of Enos or "Man," as well as in seeing his name in the *Bosheth* of Mephi-bosheth and Ish-bosheth (2 Sam. ii. 8; 1 Chron. viii. 33) where *Bosheth* has first been contracted from **בן-שת** (as in Bedad for Ben-Dad) and then assimilated to **בשת** "shame." What makes the latter conjecture the more probable is that **שת** must mean "the phallus" (see 2 Sam. x. 4; Isa. xx. 4), and stand for **שנת**, the Assyrian *sinātu* "urine." Possibly Sheth was the native name of the Moabite god Baal-peor.

I am inclined to believe that the name of the god Sheth occurs in Gen. iv. 7, in a very disguised form. We here have an old proverb quoted: "If thou doest well, it is **שאת**; and if thou doest not well, **חטאת** lieth at the door." Now the second part of the phrase is found in the Assyrian legend of the plague-god Nerra (M. 55. col. I. 4) where we read D. P. Ner-ra ra-bi-šu abulli-šu "the god

¹ It is possible that the **קֵת** of Amos was suggested by the like-sounding **קֵתִי**, the poetical synonym of **בְּנִי**.

Nerra lieth at its gate.”¹ Consequently חטאת will be the Hebrew equivalent of the Assyrian Nerra, and will mean, not “sin”—which makes no sense—but rather the punishment that follows upon sin. It has taken the place of the earlier angel of pestilence. As the latter portion of the proverb thus once contained the name of a deity, the first portion of it must have done so too, and since the termination of שאת has obviously been assimilated to that of חטאת, it is reasonable to suppose that this divine name was ישׁת. When the proverb passed into Hebrew mouths, the god Sheth became an abstract noun, and with the assistance of the interpolated א and the change of שׁ into שׁ was identified with שאת “exaltation.” The latter word, however, agrees but badly with the context of the proverb, and can only be forced into harmony with it by the gratuitous supposition that פנים is “understood.”

¹ We should notice the difference of form assumed by the proverb in the mouths of the settled Babylonians and the nomad Hebrews. The “city-gate” of the one is replaced by the “tent-door” of the other.